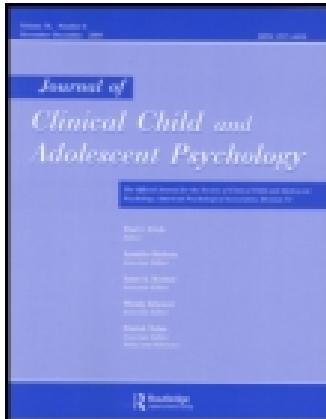


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### Institutionally sanctioned violence

Albert Bandura <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology , Stanford University , Stanford, California, 94305

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WHY VIOLENCE

*Albert Bandura is Professor of Psychology at Stanford University and the President of the American Psychological Association. He was formerly Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and serves on the editorial boards of several professional journals. He is coauthor of Adolescent Aggression and Social Learning and Personality Development. The article below is Dr. Bandura's acceptance speech on receiving the Outstanding Professional Contribution Award of the California State Psychological Association early this year.*

## INSTITUTIONALLY SANCTIONED VIOLENCE

By ALBERT BANDURA

It is customary for recipients to comment briefly on their research activities. During the past year, I have been analyzing aggression from a social learning perspective. Psychological explanations of aggression have been largely concerned with individual injurious acts that are aversively motivated. However, injurious social practices that produce widespread devastating consequences have received less consideration. In my work, I have attempted to analyze conditions governing all facets of aggression, whether individual or collective, personal or institutionally sanctioned.

Events of recent years have forced social scientists to shift their focus from the free-lancing aggressor to institutionally sanctioned violence. The issue of major concern is how does a society recruit otherwise decent and compassionate people for destructive purposes? By employing self-absolving practices, moral people can be led to behave destructively without self-condemnation.

### FORMS OF SELF-EXONERATION

**Justification of aggression in terms of higher principles.** Violence is morally sanctioned in the name of religious principles, freedom, and social order. Given sufficiently noble aims, almost any form of aggression can be justified as righteous.

**Slighting of aggression by advantageous comparison.** A practice that is widely employed is to slight one's aggressive actions by comparison with more heinous outcomes. Americans minimized the slaying of countless Indochinese as checking massive Communist enslavement. The self-appointed

protectors remained unperturbed by the fact that the intended beneficiaries were exterminated at an alarming rate.

**Displacement of responsibility.** People can be led to behave cruelly provided that a legitimate authority is willing to assume responsibility for their actions. Responsibility for cruel deeds is not always assumed openly because no one wants to be answerable for such acts. To reduce risks to themselves, superiors usually invite and condone reprehensible conduct by their subordinates in insidious ways that allow them to claim ignorance for what was happening, in the event that disclosures arouse public condemnation.

**Diffusion of responsibility.** Exemption from self-censure can be achieved also by obscuring and diffusing responsibility for aggressive practices. Collective aggression includes many task functions, which must be supported by an organizational apparatus. Departmentalization of destruction works in several ways to reduce participants' sense of personal responsibility for their behavior. Through diffusion of labor, division of decision-making, and collective action, people can be contributors to cruel practices without seeming personally responsible for their part in it.

**Dehumanization of victims.** A further self-absolving device is to dehumanize the victims. They are divested of human qualities by being viewed, not as individuals with sensitivities, but as objects bearing demeaning labels. If dispossessing victims of humanness does not fully eliminate self-reproach, it can be further reduced by attributing subhuman characteristics to them. After victims have been so devalued, they can be cruelly



**WHAT THE VIETNAMESE NEED  
IS A SENSE OF HUMOR**

- General William C. Westmoreland

attacked without much risk of self-condemnation.

**Attribution of blame to victims.** Attribution of blame to victims is still another expedient that can be used for self-assuaging purposes. In this process, aggressors see themselves as essentially persons of good will who are forced into punitive actions by villainous adversaries. Victims are condemned for bringing the suffering on themselves either by their character defects or by their provocative behavior. Seeing victims suffer punitive treatment, for which they are held partially responsible, also leads observers to devalue them. The indignation aroused by attributed blame, in turn, provides more support for even more brutal acts of aggression.

**Misrepresentation of consequences.** After people have aggressed, additional self-placating measures are available that operate through misrepresentation of the consequences of one's actions. As long as the damages that aggressors cause are disregarded or belittled, they have little reason to restrain their actions.

**Graduated desensitization.** Self-absolving practices will not instantaneously transform a gentle person into a brutal aggressor. Rather, the change is achieved through a gradual desensitization process, in which the participants may not fully recognize the marked changes they have undergone. Initially, individuals are prompted to perform aggressive acts they can

tolerate without excessive self-censure. After their self-reproach is extinguished through repeated performance, the level of aggression is increased in this manner, until eventually gruesome deeds can be performed without much distress.

**Profitable aggression.** Exonerating practices are usually analyzed in military atrocities or political violence. This restricted focus conveys the impression that sanctioning of human cruelty occurs only under extraordinary circumstances. Quite the contrary. It is a common practice in everyday life. There exist many societal practices that have widespread injurious consequences. Being financially profitable or politically expedient, they are institutionally sanctioned and routinely performed by decent people under self-exonerating disguises.

- Institutionalized discrimination takes a heavy toll of victims.
- A variety of industries, each with its publicly spirited justifications, create destructive effects on a large scale.
- Exploitation of human cruelty by the television industry further illustrates the authorization of violence for commercial purposes.

### SOLUTIONS

Like so many other problems confronting mankind, there is no single grand design for lowering the level of destructiveness within a society. It requires both individual corrective effort and group action aimed at changing the practices of social systems.

In a recently completed book on aggression, I have outlined ways in which social systems that contribute to violence can be changed to function in more constructive ways:

**Enforcement agencies.** Programs are proposed for modifying provocative police practices that arise either from individual ineptitude, or are organizationally condoned.

**Correctional systems.** Community-based remedial programs are described that offer effective alternatives for existing correctional practices that are admitted failures.

**Mass media.** Different courses of action are outlined by which the public can reduce the commercial marketing of violence in the mass media and change it into an instrument of human betterment.

**Community services.** In public agencies that enjoy monopolies over given functions, the practices that evolve are more likely to serve the interests and convenience of those who run the services than to maximize benefits for their clientele. Systems of accountability are described that would make public agencies more responsive to the needs of those they serve.

**Legal system.** The law can be used as an instrument of social change as well as to preserve existing practices.

Since aggression is not an inevitable or unchangeable aspect of man but a product of aggression promoting conditions operating within a society, man has the power to reduce his level of violence. As social scientists, we must intensify our efforts to insure that mankind will use this capability beneficially rather than destructively.

*Stanford University  
Department of Psychology  
Stanford, California 94305*



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